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Wandering Souls

Family and friends wondered why we were so angry. “What are you crying about? They would ask... Our fathers and grandfathers had gone off to war, done their duty, come home and got on with it. What made our generation so different? As it turns out, nothing. No difference at all. When old soldiers from “good” wars are dragged from behind the curtain of myth and sentiment and brought into the light, they too seem to smolder with choler and alienation... So we were angry. Our anger was old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilized men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry.

– Michael Norman, from *These Good Men: Friendships Forged From War*



ON THE 18TH OF MARCH, 1969, Homer Steedly, a young American infantry lieutenant, turned a bend in a trail in Kontum Province and came face to face with a North Vietnamese soldier, his weapon slung over his shoulder. The soldier, who Steedly first took for an enemy officer, was a 24-year-old medic named Hoang Ngoc Dam, from the village of Thai Giang, near Hai Phong—a fact the lieutenant would not discover for over thirty years. There was no time then for more than a quick glimpse of each other. As soon as Dam saw Homer, he snatched his weapon off his shoulder and brought it around. “I shouted *Chieu Hoi*, the phrase to surrender,” Homer wrote in his journal, “but he continued to draw down on me. I fired just before he got his rifle on me. If I had

not been so scared, I might have had the presence of mind to just wound him, but in my adrenalin rush panic, I killed him with one shot through the heart.”

For a time he stared in a daze at the body. The man he'd killed was young, his pith helmet clean, his uniform starched, and the SKS rifle clutched in his hands new, the greasy cosmoline used as an anti-rust still gooped on its bayonet hinge—someone new to the war, Homer concluded. He bent down and went through the dead man's pockets, drawing out a notebook with a colorful picture of a man and woman in what he took to be traditional or ancient Vietnamese dress on the front cover, and a daily and monthly calendar grid, labeled with the English word “schedule” on the back; a smaller black notebook, and a number of loose papers—letters, i.d. cards, some sort of certificates. The spine and corners of the first notebook had been neatly reinforced with black tape.

Thirty-five years later, as I handed that notebook to Dam's brother, I was struck again with the care Dam had taken in binding it up. He was a soldier in an army where nothing could be thrown away, nothing wasted, and I thought, not for the first time, of what the appearance of that book must have meant to Homer as he looked through it on that dark trail. Raised on a small, hardscrabble farm, Homer knew the preciousness of things that could not be replaced, knew how to shepherd them. The way he had shot Dam was unusual: a gunfighter duel in a war in which more often than not the enemy remained faceless to the Americans, only sudden flashes of fire from the jungle, targets to be annihilated. That invisibility was frustrating to the GI's, but at least it allowed the comfort of dehumanizing the enemy, making him into ghost, demon, target. To see not only the face of the man he'd killed, but also the carefully re-bound covers, the force of will that the meticulous writing and drawings inside the book revealed, confronted Homer with a mirrored and valuable humanity. He tried not to think about it. There was scarcely the time anyway, and later that same day, he'd have one more encounter with a soldier who wanted to shoot him—this time, an American who the war had broken, who had already had shot and killed another soldier. Homer was able to talk that man into laying down his weapon, and so that day he had taken a life and saved a life. He couldn't dwell on the former. It was, in any case, a killing justified by custom, law, and the need to survive.

Homer sent the documents to the rear area, where he knew they'd be assessed and then burnt. But later that evening he changed his mind, contacted a friend in S-2, intelligence and asked him to bring everything back. He couldn't bear to have the documents, the last evidence of the life he'd taken, destroyed. “I kept his personal documents and will send them home,” he wrote to his mother. “Someday, perhaps, I will be able to contact his relatives.” By refusing to let go of the notebooks he'd taken from Dam's body, Homer somehow understood,

though he could not put it into words or coherent thoughts until years later, that he was hanging onto a grief that was the price of remaining human.

The shy son of a South Carolina sharecropper and his German war bride, Homer considered himself an unlikely officer. He had grown up poor in the rural South. Unable to afford more than a year of college, he enlisted in the army in order to get training and save money for his education. But the army saw leadership potential in him, and in 1967, he was sent to Officer Candidate School, graduating as a second lieutenant. One of his classmates was William J. Calley, who, exactly one year and two days before Homer would shoot Dam, led and participated in the massacre of over 500 women, old men and children, all civilians, in the village Americans called My Lai, far from the arena where Homer fought his war.

“It’s a strange thing to say, because combat was so much heavier where we were in the highlands, fighting the regular NVA (North Vietnamese Army)”, Homer said, “But for me it was a blessing not to be in those areas where you couldn’t tell the VC from civilians.” He was spared from ever having to make the moral choices the soldiers who were at My Lai did or did not make. His enemy was the highly trained, well-armed regular forces of the People’s Army of Vietnam. Homer’s unit, the 1st Battalion of the 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, was engaged not in the guerilla war of rice paddies and hamlets where most casualties came from mine and booby traps and Americans couldn’t tell enemy from civilian. Instead they had humped ninety pound loads in ninety-plus degree heat and humidity, and were locked for months in savage jungle fighting, in rugged mountain country where the thick triple canopied trees made it dark at midday.

It was as clear-cut as a war could be. He and his men killed, as he had killed Dam on that mountain trail, in order to stay alive. He came to see that goal as his main job—by 1969, it was obvious to all of them that the war was only a holding action. Homer did his best, even extending his own time in the field—army officers were only required to serve six months in combat—unwilling to let his company be led by an inexperienced commander. And then he had come home. There was nothing he needed to feel guilty about. He had committed no atrocities, was no baby killer. He had been promoted and decorated. He had participated in the defining history of his time. He had experienced the close camaraderie of combat soldiers, had fought bravely and led competently, and had come back relatively intact. There were men who would and did take such experiences as the high-water marks of their lives. There were others who were foolish enough to envy them.

“When I came back,” Homer said, “I tried to talk to people. But I could see they changed towards me so I just shut up, threw myself into work.” He threw himself into a bottle as well, and at the same time began engaging in solitary and dangerous sports—cave- and sky-diving, small-plane piloting, motor cycle racing—activities where a careless or irresponsible move could get him killed, but could get *only* him killed. “The deaths and injuries [that occurred] under my leadership still haunt my memories,” he would write. “I expect they will be among the memories that flash before my eyes when I lie on my death bed. Somehow I feel guilty for having come back alive.”

He had sent the documents he’d taken from the body of the man he’d killed to his mother. She had lived through a war and its aftermath herself and she understood his need to preserve what he had taken and what had been taken from him. She carefully stored the documents in a box which she placed in the attic. They remained there for almost three decades, locked away in a space of contained darkness, a physical anamnesis of the memories of the war itself that Homer locked away inside his own mind. He had seen and done things that he knew the people around him did not want to know about or would not believe. His ears rang continuously—the result of a 105mm shell that had landed in his fighting position and splattered him with the blood of the two sergeants with him—a thin constant scream in the middle of his mind that never, to this day, went away. There were certain images burned into his brain, certain smells seared into his nostrils, certain tastes still on his tongue and he felt they composed a wall between himself and those who had not seen, felt, smelled, heard what he had. He was afraid that difference made him monstrous. He was afraid that he would turn anyone with whom he truly shared those tastes, those sounds, those sights, into himself, and there were some people he loved and he wanted to protect them, and so he remained silent.

Besides, he knew that nobody would believe him.

He might tell people, for example, of the time when one of his men out in the jungle on a listening post had been seized by a tiger, felt without any warning the terrible clamp of the animal’s jaws on his skull, its hot breath and slobber encasing his face. As he was being dragged off into the trees, the soldier had had the presence of mind to bring the barrel of his M-16 up to the animal’s flank and fire, the tiger, wounded, dropping him and disappearing. The GI was left with its mark: two perfect indentations on either side of his forehead. Homer could tell the story, but people would stare at him, say nothing, or, worst, say, sure, they’d seen that in *Apocalypse Now*, think he was making it up. They had the illusion, in their safe lives, that there were no beasts. They didn’t understand that the tiger had come into him, Homer, into all of them, eventually, had left its mark on them

and in them and in him. *Here there be tygers*, the old maps marked unknown territory. Once, on a jungle trail, he had been the tiger.

He could tell how from the 21st of March, two days after he'd shot Dam, to the 30th of March, he—a 22-year old country boy, sharecropper's kid—had commanded an under-strength company that held a hill against an overwhelming enemy force; his men with little and then no water or food, or ammunition, shelled constantly, sometimes hundreds of rounds of 105mm howitzer fire, as well as uncounted mortar rounds landing inside their 50 meter perimeter. He could tell how the North Vietnamese tried to swarm the hill, their insane bravery as they were chopped to pieces in the American cross-fire, the insane bravery of his own men fighting them off. His own insane bravery—he could never use that noun without that adjective. He could tell of the true insanity of a battalion commander who countermanded his urgent request for ammunition, food, and water, and instead risked helicopters to bring them rations they couldn't even use without the water they didn't have, and that they so desperately needed. In spite of that, his men fought on for days, in that heat, their throats swollen and parched, one man going berserk and trying to drink from a canister of diesel fuel. He could tell how a door gunner had vomited when he saw a corpse's eyes come alive with maggots, when the helicopters finally were able to take out the wounded and dead, and how on the final day of the siege, after he had made sure all his men were evacuated in the helicopters, there were so many enemy soldiers pouring into the perimeter, that he thought he and the last three men with him would have to make a run for the jungle, an also insanely brave helicopter crew disobeyed orders and extracted them in a hail of gunfire, and he looked down from the door of the helicopter to see the North Vietnamese covering the hill "like angry ants" and saw his rifle's handguard and magazine guide scarred by gunfire, bullet holes in his rucksack, through his radio, saw the crease in his helmet.

Sure, people would say; they'd seen that movie too. So he kept his mouth shut. Sealed his lips. Swallowed it. Once he had lain in the elephant- and saw-grass when his company had been ambushed, the boy next to him—who had pushed him down when the firing started and saved his life—with the top of his head blown off and he stared into the empty pink skull-cup, the sheltering grass being mowed down as if by a giant scythe. He knew he would die then and then he went away, the smell of the bullet-mulched grass suddenly wonderfully evocative of peaceful summer lawns, the sun warm and gentle on his face, the noise fading, and then suddenly back again, deafening, and then again fading away. Inches away from his eyes he saw a line of ants carrying bits of insect corpses and pieces of a strange pink fungus to their nest, their normality, their indifferent life comforting and amazing him. He slowly felt his body, the details of his own physicality; he could

even taste, feel with his tongue, a large chunk of the C-ration ham and eggs he'd had for breakfast still lodged in his cheek. He idly chewed it, and swallowed, detached from the sounds of mortars and grenades and AK-47 rounds cracking over his head. He focused again on the ants, so busy, and he glimpsed again the empty skull of the boy who had gone down near him and it came to him in a wave of bilious nausea what the strange pink chunks carried in those mandibles were, and what that glob of breakfast meat and eggs he'd felt in his cheek and swallowed really was, and he screamed, ignoring the bullets, getting on his hands and knees and projectile vomiting. He didn't tell that story. Even years later, when he wrote it, he put it in italics and red font and warned people not to look at it if they didn't want to be changed. It was the kind of story you sealed behind your lips. How could you kiss anyone again, ever, seal your mouth to the mouth of someone you loved; how would you not be afraid to let her taste what you had tasted? It all stayed inside of him, like the box in the attic, not to be opened until he opened.

Trauma, according to Dr. Judith Herman, in her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* occurs when a horrible event or events cause a break in one's own life narrative. On the other side of that break, you can no longer see yourself in the same way. Recovery from trauma starts to occur when you are able to tell your story, in sensory detail, to people willing to listen without judgment and willing to be changed by what they hear—in other words, when you can be taken back into a community that is willing to be wounded itself, willing to break through a comforting shell of protective myths and learn what you have learned. If you can't do that, if they can't do that, you remain forever alienated, forever outside your community—you are what the Vietnamese call a wandering soul.

That is what Hoang Ngoc Dam became to his family. In the Vietnamese belief, the spirits of those killed far from home, through violence or accident or war, wander the earth aimlessly, far from the family altar. There were 198 such from Dam's home village of Thai Giang, one of them his older brother, Hoang Ngoc Chi. They'd gone South, disappeared into the war as if they had stepped off the earth. Dam's family, in fact, had more knowledge than most about his fate, through a hometown friend of Dam, Pham Quang Huy, who had fought in the same area of operations in the Central Highlands.

Although the two were not in the same regiment, they tried to see each other periodically, exchange news and pass on letters. Huy found out about Dam's death from a nurse named Sinh, a month after it occurred. Dam had been in a unit that had been trying to overrun an American out-post (probably what the Americans called Fire Support Base 20—Homer's base) when they failed he was

attached to a small reconnaissance group whose mission was to scout out other attack routes. They were engaged in that activity when they had fallen into the ambush Homer's company had set up; it was in the pursuit after the ambush that Homer had come across Dam. Later, Huy had asked others in the unit about what had happened to the body, and was told that Dam had been buried by some local guerillas. After the war, his body and three others were excavated and reburied at the A Giun Pa military cemetery, in Gia Lai province. But the excavators had not properly identified any of them, and Dam's remains were now among the other unidentified bodies in that cemetery. Huy and Dam's brother-in-law, Hoang Ngoc Dieu, visited the area in 2002, hoping to find the body, bring it home to be placed among the family tombs. But all they could do was grieve for all the anonymous dead in that place. There were no remains, and no objects to be put on the family altar, to draw his soul back to the family hearth.

Dam had become one of the 300,000 wandering souls—the missing in action from the war—that still haunt Viet Nam. Without their remains being brought home and the proper ceremonies being followed, without, that is, commemoration, a physical knitting back into the community, they cannot find peace. “Strangers have buried you in careless haste,” writes the poet and war veteran Nguyen Du, of all the missing: “no loved ones near, no friend, no proper rites... and under the wan moon, no kindly smoke of incense wreathes for you.”

What were left were memories and family mythologies. Dam had been, they remembered, a bright, studious and very neat boy who at 17, had taken very seriously the role of eldest brother. They remembered the tenderness with which he had bathed the youngest, best-beloved sister of the family, Tuoi. For the first years of her life, she had suffered from a skin condition, probably eczema, that marred her and caused her to be teased cruelly by the other children, and the adults, though they pretended to be indifferent to the ugly lesions, would often hesitate to touch her, hold her, pick her up. It was only Dam, his clothing always meticulously pressed and neat, his hands and face always scrubbed, who would hug her without hesitation, pick her up, kiss her, wash her, dress her. But it was that same neatness that would later haunt Homer, who looking at Dam's clean, well-kept uniform, assumed he must have been an officer or a new guy, that became a family legend. “We were very poor,” his brother Cat said, “so I never understood how Dam got a white suit, but he wore it whenever he went out. And he studied very hard. We did not have paper, so we would take used paper and soak it in lime water and use it again as scrap paper. But Dam always kept his books in order, and he was very careful, he was neat from his hair to his way of walking, to his clothes. We did not have many clothes, but his clothes always looked pressed, even though we did not have an iron.”

And then one day he had disappeared beyond the village gate, as all the other young men had, and Tuoi was left alone, the love she felt for him an emptiness and an ache that would never go away. As he'd become for his wife, Pham Thi Minh; they'd been married ten days before he'd gone South. She never saw him again. A month before he'd gone South to the war, he had written to her to come visit him at his training base; other women from the village were coming to be with their husbands for a few days—it was a last chance, everyone understood, to leave behind a child. But she was too shy, only 17, to go there, to have everyone know she was going for that reason, and instead Dam stood guard for the other couples as they made love. It is something she regrets to this day. "I wish I could have had a daughter with him; I would have never married again. My current husband was also a soldier, wounded in the war, but he is an alcoholic, and I'm miserable. I keep thinking, if only I had a daughter with Dam, then my life would not be this miserable."

What would Dam have been if he'd returned? What had been lost? Dam became what each of the 300,000 was: a lingering question. A question that his mother, Hoang Thi Thuy, tried to answer by going to a fortune teller.

Besides his wife, Dam and his brother had left behind their parents, his father, Hoang Dinh Luc, a farmer, like Homer's father. There were also his two younger brothers, Luong and Cat, and three sisters, Thi Dam, Tham, and Tuoi. They worried constantly, but their hometown was only nominally a rear area, a safe haven. The town's closeness to the port of Hai Phong made it a target of American bombs: at one point an errant bomb fell on the schoolhouse, killing thirty-six children. Most of the young men went off to the war; some hung back. A PS in one of the letters in the packet of documents Dam was carrying speaks archly of a young man who has used his influence to keep out of the army. "When I think of him, I get embarrassed for myself and the neighborhood," the writer says. Loyalty, accepting one's military duty unquestioningly, fighting when the country called, was as expected of young people in Thai Binh province as it was in Homer's South Carolina. The families of soldiers who were "war martyrs" were compensated with stipends, job advantages, and, mainly, honor.

What the fortune teller told Dam's parents was disturbing. Their eldest boy, Chi, was indeed dead, and lay somewhere under the ocean. It was an assessment which proved accurate, when they finally got an official notification of death. Apparently Chi had been taken prisoner of war and had died in an island prison, his body flung into the sea. That accuracy stabbed like a knife when they heard the second fortune: Dam, the fortune teller said, was in America. It was a fate they couldn't imagine. Had he somehow survived and gone over to the enemy?

Or was his soul there, waiting to be commemorated and reborn? The consultation was supposedly only between Dam's mother and the fortune teller, but soon some malicious people in the town were whispering rumors about the former possibility, spurring an outraged Huy and Dieu to go South and try and find his body.

It was an issue Dam's parents did not live to see resolved. Both had passed away before we were able to return Dam's documents and allow the family and the rest of the village to finally understand exactly what the fortune teller had seen.

For a number of years, I've been involved in projects with Vietnamese writers and film-makers, traveling at least once a year to that country where I had spent my own youth as a Marine. Early in 2005, I met another writer, Tom Lacombe, also a veteran, who asked me to use my contacts in Vietnam to help a man who was trying to return some documents he had taken from the body of an NVA soldier he'd killed.

Over the last decade, Homer's life had changed to the point where he had become ready to confront his past. In the late 70s, working towards a master's degree in sociology, he had become fascinated by the then new field of computers, and had made himself an expert in the early days of information technology, finally securing a position as assistant director of the computer lab, at the University of South Carolina's College of Liberal Arts. It was an occupation challenging enough to fill his time and his thoughts and kept him from dwelling too much on the past. It was also one that allowed him to be alone, a workaholic, until one day he met Tibby Dozier, a fellow employee who consulted him about some problems with her computer. He fixed it, they fell in love and were married in 1995. Tibby, the soft-spoken daughter of a World War Two general and Medal of Honor winner, understood the nightmares and secrets of soldiers. With her encouragement, Homer began to open up and find a measure of peace in his life. He stopped drinking, and reached a point, with Tibby's urging, where he needed and wanted to examine the war which in so many ways had formed him as a human being; he needed, in Dr. Herman's model, to tell his story in a way that would make his community listen and be changed by it.

It is a need that has long pre-existed the psychological terms couched to describe it. Phil Caputo, in his Vietnam memoir, *A Rumor of War*, writes of the tradition of the battle singer, whose role was "to wring order and meaning out of the chaotic clash of arms, to keep the tribe human by providing it with models of virtuous behavior—heroes who reflected the tribe's loftiest aspirations—and with examples of impious behavior that reflected its worst failings." Homer became what his given name called him to be: a battle singer, but he did so in his own terms—by creating a web site that provided photographs and detailed accounts

of his time in the war. Now, ready to retire, assessing his past, he had come across Dam's documents, forgotten in his mother's attic.

Although the face-to-face encounter that had taken Dam's life was rare in that war, Homer's impulse to hang onto the documents was not. Nearly all North Vietnamese soldiers and Southern National Liberation Front fighters, those the Americans called Viet Cong, kept journals or diaries in which they wrote and copied poetry, their thoughts, the events of their days, and it was common practice for American GI's to take and keep these, or to give them to intelligence—so many personal documents were captured that eventually thousands were put on microfiche and are now stored in the National Archives. No one knows how many thousands more were taken by individual G.I.'s, to be brought home, stored away, locked up. The lag between locking the documents away and bringing them into the light again, the need, decades later, to not only confront and tell the unfinished past, but also to redeem it through concrete acts, was also a common reaction. Over the last ten years, many veterans have made the effort Homer vowed back in 1969: to find the families of the men or women whose documents and diaries they kept and return them—to this date over 9000 have been returned to veterans' organizations in Vietnam through the Vietnam Veterans of America Initiative Program.

Homer had spent hours scanning those documents into his website, and when I wrote to some friends in Vietnam: Phan Thanh Hao, a journalist and director of a social agency, and the writer Ho Anh Thai, I sent along the scans as email attachments. They both told me that the best solution was to bring the documents in May, when I was planning to come to Vietnam anyway, and hand them over to the Vietnamese Veterans' Association. A week later, I received an email from Hao. She had written an article published, with photos of the documents, in the newspaper *Giao Duc & Thoi Dai* (Education & Times) and Ho Anh Thai had also gotten an article published in *Lao Dong* (Labor), a major paper. The Hoang family had read the articles on the anniversary day of their mother's death, and had immediately called Hao. They were very excited. They wanted to get the documents back, and they wanted Homer to come himself—"to place them on the family altar." They had no bitterness or anger towards him, they said. It was war, and they understood war. All they felt now was gratitude.

On April 22, 2005, Homer emailed the following letter, through Hao, to the brother of the man he'd killed:

Dear Mr. Hoang Dang Cat,

I would love to have given the documents back personally, but I can't possibly afford a trip to Vietnam. I am retired, on a fixed income and with recent health problems, just don't have the money. Even if I did, I am afraid I am far too shy to meet with strangers, whose language I do not even speak. I was raised on a small farm and have always been very shy. I still do not know how I managed to be a Platoon Leader and Company Commander in the Army.

I am very touched that you have an altar that keeps Dam's memory alive. It makes me feel good to know that his brave soul is still honored in such a wonderful manner. It hurts to think of the hundreds of thousands on both sides of that tragic war, who still mourn the loss of their loved ones.

Sometimes the guilt of surviving can be overwhelming. What will I say, when I enter into eternity? Is there a little known footnote to the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill," that forgives killing in combat? Look what I did in the ignorance and folly of my youth. I thought I was a true patriot. So why doesn't that give me comfort at age 59?

Dam and I met by chance on a trail. He and I saw each other and both of us attempted to shoot the other. I lived. He died instantly. For over a quarter century I have carried the image of his young body lying there lifeless. It was my first kill. I wish I could say it was my last. Why did a medic die and I live? I don't know.

Maybe someday humanity will gain the wisdom to settle conflicts without sending its youth to kill strangers. Know that my website www.swampfox.info is an attempt to educate those who have not lived the horrors of war. People should know what our leaders are doing when they resort to armed conflict to solve political problems.

In my dying moment, Dam and many of his comrades will surely call to me. I am not afraid...only saddened. Perhaps we will meet again as friends.

*Respectfully yours,
Homer*

"I just can't do it," Homer told me. He asked if I would bring them instead. A day later, the documents arrived by Express Mail to my house. He had let them go.

I hesitated a long time before I opened the padded envelope. In the Vietnamese belief, a male contains seven souls, a female nine, and I knew for the Hoang family what I had now was literally a piece of Dam's soul. For a moment, I felt a kind of resentment, fueled by an atavistic fear. What was I releasing into my home? I had not killed this man. As soon as the thought came to me, I tried to struggle against it. One of my Vietnamese friends had written me when I told her that Homer might come over that she would not want to meet the man, was not sure she could look into his face. Homer could have been me, I replied to her. He could have been any of us.

I opened the envelope and drew out the notebooks and papers, the smell of very old, very dry paper wafting to my nostrils. Everything had been kept in pristine condition. I looked through the documents, as carefully as if I were an archaeologist examining an ancient and precious text. On one of the title pages, Dam had drawn an elaborate red and green orchid, and his name, Hoang Ngoc Dam, under the date 1-1-1966, in the kind of ornate lettering teenagers will use to inscribe their school notebooks; another, previous page was decorated with a hand-drawn pair of surgical scissors. The book was divided into sections concerning treatments for different types of wounds, though surprisingly the first section was Midwifery. Page after page was illustrated with beautifully done medical drawings: head and neck arteries, bones of the leg, the hip, and so on, as if he had copied an entire medical textbook. The work is beautiful in itself, and it is astonishing to think of Dam doing it in jungles, tunnels and caves, under bombardment and artillery fire. On the last page, was the only drawing that did not seem neat: scrawled grids, five squares per line. I wondered if they were tactical positions, battle plans, but when I showed them to a Vietnamese friend, he grinned and told me they were Vietnamese tic-tac-toe; he had played the same game when he was a kid.

Seeing and touching Dam's neat, precise hand-writing, letters tiny, using as much space as possible; the exquisitely done anatomical drawings, I thought of Homer's anguished cry in his letter to Cat: *Why did a medic die and I live?* What could Dam have become, what would he have accomplished, who else had been taken from us? The book raised the questions war always raised, that war should always raise, the questions that should always be asked before a war and never are. But what stabbed me then was the hope those meticulous drawings and notes revealed; the book was an amulet bound and filled by a young man trying his hardest to give himself the illusion of a future.

The notebook was not the only document. Inside it were four separate “Certificates of Commendation” that Dam had received. The earliest one, dated October 20, 1965, cited his “model” performance in serving the wounded soldiers of an unnamed artillery unit. He was elected (named) “outstanding individual” for the year 1965. The second, dated December 22, 1966 commended him for having “contributed to the building of a good unit during the first 6 months of 1966.” The third citation was issued on September 1, 1967 for “accomplishments in the first 6 months of 1967” and the fourth commended Dam for his accomplishment “during the general offensive and uprising of 1968,” that is, the Tet Offensive. It was dated February 10, 1969, a little more than a month before Dam would be killed.

All of the other documents belonged to another man, apparently an army truck driver named Nguyen Van Hai. The first was in fact his license, affixed with his photo: Hai was a very handsome young man, and indeed one of the other papers seemed to be a love letter and a poem to him from a girl he left behind:

*When you left I was speechless; I couldn't find the words to say.
In every step you take away from here, I carry with me the feeling
that I have... Our feelings for each other are as wide as the ocean.
What is in your heart is also in my heart. Your image has faded
away beyond the bamboo hedge, but you brought me to life. I was
so moved when you told me to wait and do my duty, so touched
that I didn't know how to reply to your words... Now you have left
to fight the Americans and I must stay here to build the country.
But I will see you again one day.*

As long as there is still Heaven
As long as there is still earth
As long as there are still clouds
You and I will meet again.

*When you left I didn't know who to talk to, to be with. You
left behind your spirit, which inspires me to keep strong. Now
that you are on your way, I wish you good health and success in
the fight against the Americans to save the country, so that we can
be reunited one day. I promise to fulfill my duties as a younger
sister should while you are away, and when you sit to your meals,
remember that there is still a younger sister who waits for you.*

Had Nguyen Van Hai been one of Dam's patients who had died? We hadn't found out anything else about him, though now I would bring his documents also to Dam's family. There were other letters to him in the packet, and a black notebook, filled with high school math problems, and copies of poems by Ho Chi Minh, in tiny handwriting.

A friend wrote:

I miss you like a son misses his father.

I bought some cloth, and will buy some for your family if they need it.

On August 26-28 the hamlet was bombed and children and old people had to be evacuated. Remember to write to me.

On the bottom of that letter is a note from Nguyen Van Hai's mother:

Your departure had made me miss you so much; I will never forget you, son. I feel sick with missing you so much.

We left for Dam's home village of Thai Giang, in Thai Binh province, at six in the morning on Saturday, the 28th of May, two days after I flew into Hanoi. Phan Thanh Hao, who had written the article that the Hoang family read had made and received literally hundreds of telephone calls, arranging the visit. The village is located deep in the countryside south of Hai Phong, and we rode out in a small van, past the new textile and clothing factories lining the Hanoi-Hai Phong highway, their products destined for Wal-Marts and Targets all over the territory of the old enemy. They were the incarnate forms reconciliation took on when it occurred between nations, and they were raising the standard of living here, we were told, but there was something bitter and mocking about them to me, about the unanswered question they evoked: what had all that killing been about? The reconciliation we were engaged in now was smaller, more personal; it was the only kind that could bring a true peace. We rode deep into the Vietnamese countryside, away from the new factories and into an older time.

With me were Hao, another writer named Y Ban, who is the editor-in-chief of Hao's paper, and George Evans and Daisy Zamora; two poets who had come on that trip to help interview Vietnamese writers for another project we were doing. George is also a Vietnam veteran, and had also been a medic. He had arrived in country in March of 1969, the month Dam was killed, and a year after his best friend, also a medic, had been killed. It was George's first time back in Vietnam since the war. His wife, Daisy, is also a veteran of the other side of a different war:

in her youth she had been a Sandinista guerilla. Her presence seemed appropriate in another way.

It took us more than three hours to get to Thai Giang, even though it is only, as the crow flies, about 40 or 50 kilometers from Hanoi. There were no direct roads, and on the way we made another stop that also seemed to take us back into the war. Y Ban's father had died the month before, and we stopped at her family's house to pay respects, and light incense at the family altar. When I asked Y Ban how he had died, she hesitated, and then said he had suffered from the effects of Agent Orange all of his life since the war; now it had finally taken him.

Some of the members of Dam's family had arranged to meet us at a bridge near the main road, where they would lead us to the village. We stopped the van at the top of the bridge and waited. After a few moments another car drove slowly past us, and then pulled in front of us and stopped. Dam's brother and sisters were wearing the white headbands that signify mourning. They were all weeping. They clutched my hand, the depth of their grief surprising me—it was as if Dam had died yesterday instead of so many years ago. They asked us to follow them in, but for me to keep the documents for now. As we drove through the lush green countryside, surrounded by rice fields, they would from time to time throw pieces of green and orange paper from their windows—Buddhist symbolic currency. They were leading Dam's soul back to his village.

I had come to Vietnam with a small NPR radio crew, to do an interview project, but I had asked they not come out with us: I expected that there would be a small, private ceremony, just for the family, and I didn't want to intrude. But as we came into the village, I was stunned to see that the street was lined with people, hundreds of them, most of whom were wearing white headbands, and many of whom were weeping and keening. I got out of the car and walked alone for a time, into the gauntlet, the rest of the party hesitant to get out of the car. I was there for Homer, as his surrogate, as his brother, and I was walking into the village of the man he had killed holding the documents in front of me like an offering, feeling the naked vulnerability of a man walking point, as if I was offering my body to something, as if I was a surrogate for more than Homer.

The others in our party had come out of the van now and caught up to me. George looked dazed. Dam's other relatives gathered around us—an entire extended family of aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins. His sisters, Thi Dam, Tuoi and Tham, his brothers, Cat and Luong were all weeping, touching the book—as was a woman I found out later was his wife, Phan Thi Minh. "I know war," Phan Thi Minh would say later, "It was horrible—all the young people had to go. My biggest memory of that time was when we had ceremonies to see young people off to the front. Families and everybody would come see them off, and we

all cried, even the officials. We did not have much hope that they would come back, and so it was as if we were parting, forever parting. The war ended more than 30 years ago, but I don't know when its consequences will end. The war still lingers, like blood trickling in our hearts."

Surrounded by a small sea of grieving people, we walked in procession to the community center, its veranda was ten deep with people. They crowded around us, needing to touch us, the women petting Daisy. Inside, on a stage, an altar had been set up; it contained incense and flowers and a large photo of Dam and was flanked by two Vietnamese veterans, standing at rigid attention, in dress white uniforms. The small, hot hall was packed with men, women and children.

A series of village and district notable mounted the podium and made speeches. Finally, Dam's brother Cat rose. His voice breaking, he thanked Homer for allowing the family this release. He bowed towards me as he spoke, and when he was finished I climbed onto the stage and presented the documents, wrapped in the national flag, to him. He placed them on the altar. Many in the crowd were wailing, crying out; Dam, folded back into his village now was himself a surrogate, a point man, for the two hundred that had been taken from this small place.

When the ceremonies were finished, we rose and walked through a soft rain to the Hoang family's compound. Thi Dam, the second youngest sister, had been weeping throughout the morning, continuously, her face so suffused with pain that I couldn't look at her. Finally, Daisy, unable to bear it, put her arm around her shoulder, and the two collapsed against each other. She had been drawn back, Daisy told me, into the griefs of her own war.

At the house, dozens of people had crowded inside, and more were on a kind of patio area under some fruit trees outside, where tables and chairs had been set up for a huge feast. The family altar was against the wall; it contained photos of Dam, his other brother, killed in the prisoner of war camp, and their parents. People kept filing in to see and touch the documents, and children stared at us, softly pulling the hair on my arms and George's, the way I remembered Vietnamese kids in the war doing, amazed at our monkey hairiness. I sat next to Cat, Dam's brother, and to Pham Quang Huy, the veteran, Dam's friend, who would later tell me details of Dam's death and burial. I had brought Nguyen Van Hai, the driver's papers, along with Dam's, and I asked Huy what could be done with these. He looked at me, as if in surprise, blinking. But hadn't anyone told me? Hai was alive; he would come to the village soon and collect his things.

We ate with the family for about an hour, and spoke about simple things—our families, our homes, and the losses of war, the price of hatred. I was told many times that they wished Homer could come. They would always welcome him,

they said—the village had even offered money to purchase a plane ticket for him. He was now a part of them.

After I returned from the village, it was a few days before I could get myself to sit down and write to Homer. A day later I received two emails in return. One was from him:

... I have a huge lump in my throat. I am sure I would have been a basket case, if I had been there. I am still trying to comprehend the totality of your email... I know it must have been difficult. Knowing that the family has the documents give me great peace of mind... will get back in touch later, after I stop sobbing.

The other came from his wife, Tibby: *...When I asked Homer how he felt after reading your email tonight, he said, "Complete."*

Two months later, sitting in the Steedly's living room in western North Carolina, an area in some ways not unlike the Central Highlands, I told Homer again how eager the Hoang family was to have him visit them. The Steedly's dog, Dottie, pushed her forehead against my side, and I scratched her ears. Moments before Tibby had told me the story of how the small black dog had come into the family. Homer had noticed her cowering under a low bridge, starved, and from her reaction to his advances, obviously abused. He had sat with her for five hours, talking softly, and had finally stuck his hand out, and when she sank her teeth into his thumb, he had not reacted, just let her grip him until she understood he would not harm her, and then she had come out and become their dog. It was something, Tibby said, that she wanted to tell me.

I'll go there, Homer said to me. He was ready now.



Homer Steedly – 1969



Homer Steedly – today



Hoang Ngoc Dam – photo on altar



Cat places documents, wrapped in flag, on altar



Some of the crowd waiting to get into the communal hall, Doai Hamlet, Thai Giang village, Thai Thuy district, Thai Binh province.



The family altar



The family (left to right): Dam's brother-in-law, Hoang Ngoc Dieu, sister Hoang Thi Tham, brother Hoang Huy Luong, journalist Phan Thanh Hao, sister Hoang Thi Tham, her daughter, sister Hoang Thi Dam, ex-wife Pham Thi Minh. Back row: Wayne Karlin and the son of Hoang Dang Cat (missing: Tuoi—sister)